

Following Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, you promise in the passage that we heard from the Old Testament to remove a heart of stone and give us a new heart. And so, Lord, we ask you and praise you, first of all, that you have done that for us in Christ.

But, Lord, we ask you in an active sense to remove the stoniness of our hearts and help us to receive what you would have for us today through song, word, sacrament, through prayer. And, Lord, may we receive.

May we just receive and be bathed in your love and receive the blessings that you intend for us. Through Jesus, we pray. Amen. Good morning and thanks for the introduction, Tommy. It is really wonderful to be here.

This is my first time in your new digs, and I tell you what, I'm grateful. A lot of our churches meet in schools, and one of the things that's always a joy to me is to meet in a high school instead of an elementary school.

And I think about that every time I go to the restroom. But anyway, you men know what I'm talking about. So anyway, it's really a blessing. Little blessings, right? But, boy, the light, the joy, it's great.

[1 : 1 2] I know you are struggling as a church to seek and find a permanent home and to minister and love and serve Christ in a place where you can be settled and to love and serve the people in and near the northeast quadrant of the district.

And I am praying with you, and we're carrying that with you. That's something that we are really carrying as a diocese, a burden for you and for other churches, because we understand the challenges that that is.

Tommy's already told you a little bit about what I do. And one of the things that encompasses the center and heart of what I do is a parish visit. And I do two things that he already mentioned. Come alongside clergy and leaders and serve them.

And I did that yesterday and met with the clergy of this church and the aspiring clergy, some aspiring clergy, and prepped for the ordination of Kevin tonight. You can do a two for today if you'd like to come back tonight.

And then we come and worship with the congregation and preach and teach the Word of God. And that's what I'm here primarily to do this morning. So if you have a Bible, you can keep it open to John 15 on your phone or wherever you want to do that with.

[2 : 2 1] We're going to range through lots of Scripture, but we'll come back time and again to John chapter 15. If you look at the Gospels as they are laid out, just physically laid out, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the first command that Jesus gives in the Gospel of Matthew is to a group of fishermen on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Now, he's announced the coming of the kingdom, but the first literal command that he gives, at least as it's recorded in the Scriptures for us in the Gospels in Matthew chapter 3, is what?

Follow me and I will make you fishers of men, right? And you scroll forward from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and you get to the end of the book of John in chapter 21, and the very last command that Jesus gives in the Gospels is, follow me.

And so I would call this basically the command of discipleship. Jesus came to win our salvation, but also to teach and train and transform a group of people to be his full followers.

And he began to say, as he proclaimed to them, follow me. And at the end of it, he said, follow me. The command of discipleship. And so the question that I want to explore with you today is really a very simple and basic question.

[3 : 32] And that is, what does it really mean to follow Jesus in a practical manner? And I want to give you three words to hang our conversation on. Companionship, obedience, and imitation.

So the first thing that we can talk about in terms of being a follower of Jesus is it simply means being with Jesus. Seeking to be close to him. Familiarity. Friendship.

You noticed in the 15th chapter of John, multiple times he talked to them as friends. And he said, no longer do I call you servants, but I call you friends. Friends. And so you might think in terms of intimate friendship or the term I use is companionship.

In Mark chapter 3, we read a story early in Jesus' ministry. He's been going around in Galilee at this time, casting out demons, healing the sick, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, teaching.

And a large crowd of people will begin to follow him. He was getting a lot of press and attention. And in verse 13 of Mark chapter 3, we read this.

[4 : 36] And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired. Interesting point. He had a very keen interest in these individuals.

Very personal interest in these individuals. Full stop.

His first strategy is relationship. His first strategy is that they might be with him. And so the entire discipleship process is centered on and begins with and centered on this relationship, this time, this companionship together.

Now, when I was a little bit younger than I am right now, maybe like 50 years ago, there was a singing group from Britain that was sweeping the world called what? The Beatles, right? They were older than I am by about 10 years.

And I know this is really hard to imagine for me anyway, but one of them is still around performing, Paul McCartney. He's got to be bumping 80. And on May 27th, he's going to be performing at the largest arena in the Triangle in North Carolina, where I live in Raleigh.

[5 : 50] As teenagers have done forever, a bunch of people became passionate followers of the Beatles, right? And we call them groupies. And they had all the posters and all the albums. And they listened to every recording.

And they listened to them constantly. And they memorized every word. And I have to confess to you that I've spent a lot of time with Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and with Rubber Soul and things like that.

They studied and learned everything they could about the lives of these people, how they had grown up in working class families in Liverpool, this blue collar town. And, you know, the amazing concept that these were the people that had transformed the world of music.

The groupies watched every live performance on TV. And you can, by the way, still see some of those on YouTube. They're these grainy, black and white Ed Sullivan things, you know. And it's kind of fun to watch those.

And if they could have possibly done it, I'm sure that any of these groupies would have, if they managed to, get a ticket to a concert, right? Because they were passionate followers of Jesus.

- [6 : 49] And in my day, there were other groups that people followed. Dinah Ross and the Supremes, the Temptations, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Who, Who, yeah. The Rolling Stones, Four Seasons, you know, Beach Boys, you know, the whole bit.
- And it seems like people were obsessed with those people, right? You remember some of them. No, you don't even remember them. Your parents remember them. I know. You know, and followers are still around.
- Groupies are still around. At the risk of showing my age and my lack of connection with pop music, I thought, who do teenage people follow today? And so I'm very, very thankful for Google, right?
- Because I have no clue. Ariana Grande, Selena Gomez, the Backstreet Boys, Justin Bieber, you know. Who are the young adults following? Like, you really impressive people out there.
- You need to school me later on, okay? But here's something to think about groupies or followers, regardless of what generation or singer celebrity they're talking about.
- [7 : 50] These followers never actually knew any of the people that they're so passionate about. If by chance they met one, that meant that they ran into them on the street or at a concert and they grabbed their autograph.
- I ran into Muhammad Ali on the streets of New York. I met him. And I got him to sign his photograph. But these people never have had a conversation with the love of their life.
- They never sat around a fireplace or a campfire in the dark and shared about things as you kind of get late at night and start talking about what's really on your heart. They never shared a meal. They never went on a walk.
- They never took a trip together. They never knew them personally. They were followers, but they had never met the person that they were following. Well, Jesus would simply say, you haven't started.
- Because the first thing is to be with me. And that theme shows up again and again and again throughout the New Testament. In John chapter 15, this well-known passage is centered on the word abiding, a branch and vine.
- [8 : 53] And if you believe in Jesus, you literally share a common life. You're joined at the hip or better, I would think it's like an umbilical cord level of relationship, which is an amazing thought for me.
- Later, the same disciple who wrote the Gospel of John wrote the epistle of 1 John. And he starts this way, that which was from the beginning, which we've heard, which we've seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands concerning the word of life.
- And you think about the intimacy that's indicated in that. The book of Hebrews, which I love, has this repeated phrase, consider Jesus. Think about him.
- Reflect. Ponder. Take time. Gaze. Look upon. And then it says, consider and come. And it keeps moving you from consider to coming. Consider to coming.
- So that it climaxes in Hebrews chapter 12 with, at the end of time, with our entire life as a Christian, is moving toward Jesus. You have not come to Mount Sinai, but you've come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the myriads of angels and to those who have been washed by the blood.
- [10 : 04] And you have come, ultimately, it says climatically, to Jesus himself. The first thing about being a follower of Jesus is spending time with him, which, of course, requires time and intentionality.

To use insider language in our movement, we can talk about the daily office. Have you ever heard that phrase? The daily office. Kind of wondered, I was thinking about this when I was preparing this, what in the world is the office?

Besides a show, right? It's from the Latin, opus and facara. Opus work, facara, to do.

It's the work we are meant to do every day. It's our daily work. The use of daily prayers to mark the times of the day and to express the traditions of our community is traditional in Judaism and Christianity from the beginning.

And so Judaism set the establishment of morning, noon, evening, and nighttime. And the daily office in our tradition, if you really follow it strictly, is morning, noon, evening, and nighttime.

[11 : 06] We also talk about the rule of life, the rhythms that you follow in order to develop the habits of your heart. And the rule of life that we talk about is solitude and silence and listening and reading and praying and journaling and all of that.

All of that is describing attentiveness. Giving your attention. To follow Jesus means friendship. And it's very, very personal.

And it begins with his desire towards you to which you respond in order to be with him. Secondly, following Jesus means obeying him.

Again, to John 15, verse 10. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I've kept my father's commandments and abide in his love.

And Jesus says the love relationship he had with the father meant that he obeyed the father. And he calls us to a love relationship with him that involves obedience. Verse 12, this is my commandment.

[12 : 10] Verse 14, you're my friends if you do what I command you. Jesus, frankly, is not very shy about calling his followers to obey him, to follow commandments.

And if we are his followers, we will seek earnestly to obey him. And again, just thinking with me, why is that? It's because friendship with Jesus puts us face to face with the issue of obedience.

Because Jesus is not like Ariana Grande or Paul McCartney. Or if we are an aficionado of some business expert like Peter and Patrick Lencioni or Gino Wickman.

We might take their advice, but we don't obey their commands. He's not a political leader that we might follow. And I won't be stupid enough in today's climate to give an example of who that might be, right?

Because Jesus is in a completely different category, right? You cannot come to Jesus without coming to the Lord of the universe. Jesus, the Lord of the universe, the creator, the redeemer, and the king.

[13 : 19] And he has an authority within himself and within his being that is self-evident to anyone truly opening to listen to him. And I mean that sincerely. If we are truly open to listening to him, the authority that he has within himself becomes self-evident to us.

Let me give an example. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, when he's teaching the people, he's saying, you've heard it said, blah, blah, blah, blah, but I say to you. And he's constantly driving concepts and truths and laws that the Jews had heard into a deeper category.

And in fact, as we listen to this, our hearts, even if we're resistant to the implications for us personally, have to acknowledge that it's the truth. You've heard it said, do not commit adultery.

That's a legal limit. But I'm saying to you, if you lust in your heart, you violated the relationship. And in fact, we know that if we give in to sexual lust, that we're violating relationships.

He says later on in chapter 7 of Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, whatever you want to do to others, do that unto them, for this is the law and the commandments. And I was literally thinking about this last night before I kind of thought it worked into my sermon.

[14 : 33] Because I was thinking about what somebody was thinking of me. You know, I was kind of going, you know, did I make a good impression? Did I communicate and all these kind of things? And then suddenly the Lord said, whatever you want them to do to you, do that to them.

So then suddenly the whole conversation begins on, okay, how do I think of them? And how do I regard them? And how do I respect them? And in fact, I realized when that sort of sucked into my soul, that Jesus had turned the entire thing around into truth, into reality that pushes deeper into my life.

So we listen to the Sermon on the Mount, we hear his teaching, and there's something that just starts to sink into us. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the people said they were amazed at his teaching, because he was teaching them as one who had what?

As one who had what? As one who had what? Authority, and not as their scribes. Jesus has the authority to teach us and to command us and to tell us what to do. And this relationship with Jesus that we emphasized in the first part is all wrapped up with obedience.

And in fact, it deepens through obedience. John chapter 14. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me, and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

[15 : 52] Now, you may not like the rules of the game when he says that. But I guess, to be honest with you, he didn't ask our opinion. Right? He just simply says, if you love me, you'll keep my commandments, and if you keep my commandments, I will love you and come to you.

And that's all wrapped up with the simple fact that he is God, and we're not. And we have to come to grips with that. George MacDonald is the famous Scottish author and preacher and theologian.

And he has a quote that really ministered to me a few months ago. Do you worry about whether or not you know Jesus, that your faith is true? Stop worrying and fretting. Get up and obey whatever he is telling you to do.

If there's nothing in your day which you do simply because he says to do it, or that you do not do simply because he forbids it, then you are not following him. If you ask, am I a follower of Jesus in truth?

I reply, if you follow, then obey and you follow. And that really helped me. Because it just translates this whole conversation into something quite practical.

[17 : 02] Companionship, obedience, imitation. The third element of being a follower of Jesus is imitating him, which is doing what he says and looking at him carefully enough to see him and imitate him.

Now, I want you to hang on with me here because what I'm saying here is, I want to be very clear, it's a step beyond obedience. And in fact, it's the step where we need to go. Friendship faces us with the reality that we are friends with the Lord of the universe and therefore he has the right to give us the boundaries of our behavior.

To set the directions of the ethics and morals that define our lives in a way that is appropriate to being friends with the Lord of the universe. But that's only the beginning.

That's sort of the initial boundaries. Because it goes much, much further than that. The commands of God were never meant to cover every contingency in life. But obedience, the boundaries cannot possibly encompass everything we'll face.

And even from the beginning of the introduction of the ethical and moral law and the religious law to the people of Israel, God says, but let me summarize it for you.

[18 : 18] And we've already said it today. Let me put it all together for you. You shall what? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

And my position to you today, my proposition to you today, is that imitation, the imitation of Christ, the imitation of Jesus, is going beyond all legal limits of obedience into a life of true love because that is the life of Jesus.

Let me give you an example. It really gets my attention. One of my favorite stories in the Gospels is in Mark chapter 2. Again, early in Jesus' ministry, a leper comes to him and falls on his knees and says, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

And you're familiar with the condition of a leper, right? That when a person was diagnosed with leprosy, they were immediately cast out of their home and out of their community. So the moment you were diagnosed as a leper, that was the last time you ever held your wife in your arms or ever held your child in your lap.

You were pushed into a place where the only other people around you were unclean. You walked through the streets, covering your head, yelling, unclean, unclean, unclean. People would throw rocks at you and tell you in because they wanted distance from you.

[19 : 32] And so this leper comes to Jesus and he falls on his knees and he says, if you're willing, you can make me clean.

And the text reads this, and moved with compassion, love, Jesus reached out and touched him.

How long had it been since anybody who was whole and clean and pure and right had touched him? Well, since the day he was diagnosed.

And Jesus touched him. Now, what am I trying to give you in this story? Well, within our churches, issues of justice and mercy and compassion have a lot of currency, right?

And that's good and that's true and right. And we think about what does it mean to be people of justice and people of compassion and people of mercy. And there are a lot of things that we can do that are right and good. But I think we need to ask ourselves a deeper question.

[20 : 31] And that is, what does Jesus do with the people that he is extending justice toward? And what does he do with the people that he is extending mercy and compassion toward? And I'm not criticizing anything I'm about to list for you because I do these things, you know, when I'm, I think, really tuned in.

But it's more than sending money. You know, it's more than writing letters. It's more than a vote. It's more than giving out water bottles and snacks to the people on the street. All of that's good.

But eventually we have to think about what Jesus did, which he did not command us to do. In other words, he did not ever say to us, reach out and touch a leper.

And yet that's what he did. And yet that's what he did. And so it forces me to go, what do I need to do to go deeper than the legal requirement? What does it mean to do to go further than that so that they may be released from the prison of rejection or the prison of their horror, whatever it may be?

What does it mean to pray into their life for healing on a deeper level? Because that's the life of love, right? That's the love of Jesus. We read a portion of Ephesians 4 today.

[21 : 50] And if you go back and look at that, starting in verse 17 of chapter 4, there's this radical community of love that's being described. And it literally is command after command after command after command. And they're good commands.

They're things that ought to be. They're very practical kinds of things. But at the end of it, it sums it up. And it simply says, and at the end of all things, walk in love as Jesus has loved you. In the message, Eugene Peterson says it this way.

And I like this. Watch what God does and then do it. Like children who learn proper behavior from their parents, mostly what God does is love you.

Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us.

Love like that. And so my proposition to you in terms of following Christ, and I think this is an accurate understanding of following, is it's being with him and it's obeying him.

[22 : 51] But it is in also learning to imitate him. The disciples saw him pray morning after morning after morning. So watching him pray, they said what? Teach us to pray. We want to imitate you.

They saw him reach out and touch people with compassion. And after Pentecost, you see the disciples reaching out and touching people in compassion.

And so there was a physicality to his love. Imitation. Intimacy. Companionship.

Obedience. And imitation. The first command and the last command of discipleship. And then to round it out, there's one more piece of good news for the day.

And that is that he has not left us on our own to do that. Let me illustrate. The disciples that he gathered to himself in Mark chapter 3, those 12 people plus a lot of others, heard everything that I said to you today.

[23 : 53] They heard him say these things directly. They saw these things. They heard the commands. They were pointing, you know, all the things that I'm pointing out to you, they were, it was firsthand real to them. How did they do with following him on earth?

Well, basically terribly. You know, terribly. They didn't understand. They kept stumbling their toes. They had opportunities to minister, to do good works, and they backfired.

Why can't we throw this demon out? You know what I mean? They called down fire on the enemies to destroy everybody else besides themselves. They were extremely radical in their understanding. They misunderstood the heart of Jesus.

They tried to stop him from doing what he came to do. No, Lord, you can't do that. You can't do that. I'm sorry. You can't do that. He asked them directly in the Garden of Gethsemane, just come, guys, hang out with me.

Would you just pray with me? And they fell asleep. At his arrest, Peter, his closest friend, betrayed him. At his crucifixion, everybody deserted him except the youngest.

[24 : 54] In other words, they could not manage to be his followers. But you know where I'm headed with this because something happened 50 days after the resurrection, right?

Pentecost. And he poured out his spirit and that changed everything. So once we get on the other side of Pentecost, there is a transformation into a new life and a new intimacy and a new experience of the presence and the love of God and a new power and a new confidence and a new effectiveness.

And he says that all along, by the way, in John 14, 15, and 16. I'm going to send the Holy Spirit to you so that you'll remember what I say. But that scrolls forward to me in my mind to one of the most incredible chapters in all the Word of God, which is Romans chapter 8, where it says that the secret of living this life is the presence and the power and the companionship of the Holy Spirit.

And the constant walking in the Spirit and walking with the Spirit and the reliance on the Spirit. And I don't think that's a very sophisticated thing. There's no magic to that.

That just simply means help me every moment I can think about it. Turn every stress point of my obedience or my intimacy or my friendship or my imitation into a point of prayer.

[26 : 09] Let me say that again. Every point of stress where your inner brow furrows at the face and the thought of your Christian life, turn that into prayer.

And ask the Spirit of God to do for you what you cannot do in your own strength. And then continue to walk. Continue to walk. And in Romans chapter 8, I think very climactically, it says that ultimately that what we have received is the spirit of adoption.

The spirit that guarantees that God looks at us and says, you are my beloved daughter with whom I'm well pleased. Or you are my beloved son with whom I'm well pleased.

And so where it all begins, by the way, is he called to them those whom he desired. It begins with his love.

It begins with his love that begins toward us. He calls us to himself and ends with our imitation of Christ, which is a life of love that goes beyond obedience, includes it, but certainly goes beyond it, in our friendship and our following of him.

[27 : 23] Please pray with me. Don't be afraid. God bless you. Good to be Marie första também. Okay? Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Father■■■?

Thank you. Thank you. Oh my name is W Sta. So my name is W undo. Let me tell you how my husband, God he of our intuition and with the needs of us is yes.

Thank you. Did you know you got here?